

Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice as the Founding Ideology for Saudi Arabia and Iran

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1. Introduction

(1) Aim of this Paper

The aim of this paper is to study one of the teachings of Islam, “promotion of virtue and prevention of vice,” by examining it as a founding ideology for nations.

“Promotion of virtue and prevention of vice (Arabic: *amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-nahy 'an al-munkar*),” hereafter shortened to PVPV, is a teaching that orders all believers of Islam to correct the words and actions of other believers, when these are not in accordance with the teachings or perceptions of Islam. The verses of the Holy *Qur'ān* and *Hadīth* (the record of *Sunna*, the words and actions of Prophet Muḥammad) below are nearly always cited as the premise for this teaching:

“And let there be among you a community promoting virtue, and advocating righteousness, and preventing vice. These are the successful¹.”

“Whoever among you sees vice, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith².”

PVPV became the subject of systematisation under the name *ḥisba*, through the theory of governance of Muslim society by the theorisation within the study of Sunni Islamic law (*fiqh*) in the Middle Ages. *Ḥisba*, in Arabic, originally means “calculation” or “sum,” and implies the accumulation of a believer’s good and bad deeds in their lifetime, which determines the decision of whether they go to heaven or hell in their

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¹ Chapter 3 (Āl ‘Imrān), verse 104.

² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, etc.

afterlife. Based on this idea, *ḥisba*, as a technical term used in Islamic law, means in general the preservation of the public order in Muslim society reflecting Islamic teachings and values.

Through the works of medieval scholars of Islamic law represented by ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Māwardī (975-1058), *ḥisba* was institutionalised for policing public morality and the punishment for those who violated it, aiming to realise Islamic values in the public sphere³. Therefore, PVPV is often regarded as the dogmatic basis for policing public morals by governmental bodies. This paper, on the other hand, focuses on PVPV as not only the foundation for studying the preservation of public morals in society and the punishment for failure to do so, but also as the founding ideology that aims to build a new society itself.

(2) Saudi Arabia and Iran

Although this paper studies the connection between PVPV and nation building, it must be made clear that the aim of the paper is not to discuss the compatibility of Islam and the modern nation state. The main concern of this paper is the importance of PVPV for the state built under the banner of Islam; therefore, this paper examines two cases, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

These two countries are generally known as “strict” Islamic states, but what “strict” signifies varies between the two. Saudi Arabia seeks the pure monotheistic norms of Islam in order to form a righteous society, depending on only the holy *Qur’ān* and *Sunna*, based on “Wahhabism.” Iran, under the political regime called “*velāyat-e faqīh* (guardianship of the jurisconsult),” set out to form a regime based on Islamic perceptions so that the citizens follow Islamic values within these two countries’ territory.

On the other hand, PVPV is rarely examined during the study of the religious uniqueness and construction of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead, what usually captures attention when explaining the uniqueness of these countries are the hard-line ideas of monotheism prohibiting local saint veneration or visiting their graves and so on in Saudi Arabia, and the theocratic regime represented by an Islamic scholar as the head of the state in Iran.

In addition, Saudi Arabia and Iran are regarded in the light of their opposing affiliations to the two main sects of Islam, as the former is Sunni, while the latter is Shi’a.

³ His book, entitled *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭānīya*, is the most famous work of the theory of *ḥisba*. The other work with the same title by Abū Ya’lā Muḥammad ibn al-Farrā’ (990-1066) is also the prominent one.

Therefore, it is not customary practice to compare and study the religious affinity between the two countries' ideological background, that is, Wahhabism based on the hard-line Sunni order, and *velāyat-e faqīh* based on the Shi'a tradition.

This paper, however, emphasises the common historical background between the two countries, that were born for the cause of Islam, and affirms that PVPV could be significant as the founding ideology of the state, whether interpreted as Wahhabism or *velāyat-e faqīh*.

(3) Previous Research

As far as research focusing on PVPV as an Islamic teaching is concerned, there is comprehensive work on Islamic thought by M. Cook, which examines PVPV for several sects and schools of Islam, including in Saudi Arabia and Iran⁴. However, this kind of comparative research focusing on thought is an exception, as most research about PVPV is on the history of Sunni Islamic society. Of the others, the major figure of concern is the government official called *muhtasib*, who policed people's behaviour in the public sphere, based on *hisba*. Historical studies have used the accounts of the *muhtasib* and those who interacted with them to document people's lives as well as urban development in medieval Muslim societies⁵. This implies the separation of concerns between the study of *hisba* as an Islamic teaching and that of *muhtasib* as a phenomenon of social history⁶.

In the modern context, there is some research focusing on governmental "religious police" that polices people's behaviour based on the teaching of PVPV in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and so on⁷. However, one, most of these works are concerned with the political or social situation of each country, and not the ideological or historical continuity of PVPV; and two, these works are generally not based on comparative viewpoints.

Regarding Saudi Arabia and Iran, two distinct and geopolitically important countries, there is ample research focusing on aspects such as history, politics, economy, and the process of nation building. However, as explained above, since Wahhabism and *velāyat-e faqīh* are generally considered the ideological key of nation building the

⁴ Cook, 2001.

⁵ Stilt's work as for recent example showing the details *muhtasib*'s activities in the society. Stilt, 2011.

⁶ For example, most of the introduction of *hisba* by *The Encyclopedia of Islam* is the explanation of *muhtasib*. Ansari, 1986.

⁷ Mouline 2011, Feener 2013, Otto & Michiel 2016, Eltantawi 2017 etc.

viewpoint that directly focuses on PVPV is not common. Most previous research on Saudi Arabia does not connect Wahhabism and PVPV. For example, G. Rentz, who specialises in the history of the Arabian Peninsula, and N. Delong-Bas, who deals with modern Islamic thought, both describe the history of Saudi nation building and Wahhabism in their works, yet neither refers to PVPV. On the other hand, in the case of Iran, although PVPV is recognised as one of the key ideas for *velāyat-e faqīh*, it is rarely dealt with as a major factor in the construction of the republic. One of the reasons for this could be that PVPV has generally been examined within *ḥisba*, the classical theory of Sunni Islamic law, that is, PVPV has not been the subject in the Shi'a context often enough.

As seen above, while PVPV is clearly an authentic teaching of Islam rooted in *Qur'ān*, against the background of the institutionalisation of *ḥisba* based on the context of Sunni Islamic law, in conjunction with the focus on the historical *muḥtasib* and modern “religious police,” the interest in PVPV tends to be biased towards, and even limited to, its role in policing public morals. This paper tries to remedy this limitation of the current research backdrop by suggesting another crucial aspect of Islamic thought that PVPV may represent.

2. PVPV for Saudi Arabia

(1) Wahhabism and Nation Building

First, we consider PVPV's position in the Islamic background of Saudi Arabia by recounting a brief history of the rise of the country.

The present Saudi Arabia has been ruled since 1902 by its third dynasty⁸, following two before (from 1744-1818, and 1824-1889). The origin of the country is at Riyadh, the present capital located in the central province of the Arabian Peninsula, named Najd, in 1744. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792), born at Uyanya village in Najd, was an Islamic scholar known for his orthodox attitude towards the local customs prevalent in Najd at the time. He strongly criticised tree worship, visiting graves, wearing amulets, and crystal gazing, all of which were commonly seen in Najd, considering them as heretical innovations (*bid'a*) that would lead people to polytheism⁹.

⁸ More precisely, 1902 is the year when the first king of present Saudi Arabia, 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Su'ūd captured Riyadh, while the official year is 1932 when the Ibn Su'ūd established the present territory, under the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (*al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Su'ūdiyya*).

⁹ Monotheism for Islam does not only deny the pluralism of God, but also something that has the similar power and authority as the God has.

He accused other elder Ulama (scholars) who tolerated these customs of being ignorant of *Qur'ān* and *Sunna*¹⁰.

This led to him being regarded as a nuisance, and he left his village to study in Basra and Mecca, finally moving to Riyadh. In Riyadh, he met the head of a local ruling family, Muḥammad ibn Su'ūd (1697-1765), who treated Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb reverently as a prominent master of Islam. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb exhorted to Ibn Su'ūd that the latter had been ordained by God to be the ruler of Najd, after getting rid of all *bid'a* from society, an idea that Ibn Su'ūd readily accepted. Thereafter, in order to eliminate polytheistic customs from Najd, they started to build a new country based on the pact formed in 1744, according to which the house of Ibn Su'ūd (*Āl Su'ūd*) assumed political affairs, and the house of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (*Āl al-Shaykh*) assumed religious affairs.

It is significant to note here that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's claims were not mere religious ideas for Muslims, but a form of political thought with a definitive purpose of building a state, centring on an intensive monotheism (*tawḥīd*) denying any polytheistic customs¹¹. Based on this premise, PVPV became the key to penetrate society with *tawḥīd* as the governing principle and maintain it. In their religio-political pact, Ibn Su'ūd and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb agreed to fulfil the vision of PVPV in society, in addition to the elimination of *bid'a*. As already described, PVPV focuses on forming and maintaining public order in society; therefore, PVPV could be affinitive to Wahhabism, which aimed to form an Islamic society¹².

In spite of this, the general discourse on Wahhabism focuses on the kind of *bid'a* that Wahhabism denies, and not on PVPV. One of the reasons for it might be that the works of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb mainly deal with the explanation of what is *tawḥīd*¹³. Therefore, Wahhabism as a teaching based on *tawḥīd*, and one as a political movement aimed at building a state, have often been regarded as something separate.

(2) The View on PVPV from Official Clerics

In contemporary Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia, how is PVPV recognised as an

¹⁰ Delong-Bas, 2004, p. 19-20.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9, 19.

¹² Darwish, 2005, p. 23.

¹³ In the most famous book of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd (The Book of Monotheism)*, he clarifies what *tawḥīd* is, and what prevent it, through the several specific cases seen in Najd at the day.

Islamic teaching? Here I would like to draw on Saudi official clerics' views on PVPV.

As described above, through the religio-political pact, it was decided that religious affairs would be managed by the house of Shaykh (Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb). Thus, members of the house led the country's religious policies since the establishment of the third dynasty, and this custom continued after the institutionalisation of religious circles in the 1950s. However, after the establishment of the Committee of Supreme Scholars (*Hay'a Kibār al-'Ulamā'*) as a bureaucratic institution in the 1970s, Saudi religious circles turned from being centred on the house of Shaykh as country's spiritual authority, to being centred on appointed scholars as bureaucracy¹⁴. The Committee is the only religious body approved to issue religious opinions (*fatwā*) to the public, making them responsible for forming the "official" discourse of Islam in the country.

In light of this, I would like to illustrate official clerics' understanding of PVPV, through some *fatwās* issued by 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Bāz (1911-1999), who was the most prominent religious figure in Saudi Arabia by serving as the head of the Committee of Supreme Scholars, as below.

"PVPV can't be said to be the sixth pillar¹⁵, but one of those that support Islam, and one of the duties ... It is like *jihād* is one of the supports [for Islam]¹⁶."

"The faith (*īmān*) in God includes all that He and His messenger ordered. It means prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, *jihād*, and PVPV¹⁷."

As seen above, Ibn Bāz recognises the importance of PVPV as an Islamic teaching. Based on this, he also explains the role of PVPV for society, emphasising that PVPV has a key contribution in the formation of a society with Islamic values.

"PVPV is one of the most important duties and the great responsibility of Islam ... and is the biggest factor to improve Islamic society¹⁸."

However, the current understanding of Wahhabism focuses on *tawhīd* as its found-

¹⁴ Al Atawneh 2010, Stenslie 2012.

¹⁵ This *fatwā* is the answer for the question asking whether PVPV is sixth pillar, that means the sixth obligatory act after confession, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage.

¹⁶ Ibn Bāz, 1991, p. 74.

¹⁷ Id., 2005, p. 15-16.

¹⁸ Id., 1994, p. 331.

ing principle. Therefore, although PVPV is a way to instil Islamic order in society, it does not take centre-stage in the discourses on nation building of Saudi Arabia, despite its importance as an Islamic teaching. Further, it is important to note that in most instances where PVPV is referred to, it is through the particular body of the Committee of PVPV, as discussed below.

(3) The Committee of PVPV

The Committee of PVPV (*Hay'a al-Amr bi-l-Ma'rūf wa-n-Nahy 'an al-Munkar*), originated from a volunteer group established in Riyadh by six scholars in 1917¹⁹, and is now a governmental body that engages in policing public morals²⁰. The committee that was first officially established in 1924 in Mecca, was a kind of religious pioneer at that time, with the purpose of extending Wahhabism to the kingdom's frontier, in parallel with security enforcement²¹. This role was inherited after the present territory of the kingdom was confirmed in 1932, and the headquarter of the committee was moved to Riyadh in 1952, as seen in the existing code of the committee below²².

The Purpose of the Committee:

To assume the duty of shari'a²³, that aims to realise PVPV imposed in society, and to accomplish [the spread of] mercy.

To embody the righteous Islam for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the centre of the Islamic world, where the people received the revelation, the model of the Islamic world, which attracts the attention of all Muslims.

The Mission of the Committee:

To prohibit vices, including violation of what shari'a prohibits, wrong customs and blind adherence (taqlid), and various unacceptable bid'a.

¹⁹ Hay'a al-Amr bi-l-Ma'rūf wa-n-Nahy 'an al-Munkar, 2009/10c (1431), p. 32.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Id., 2009/10b (1431), p. 130.

²² Id., 2009/10a (1431), p. 8.

²³ *Shari'a* is generally translated as "Islamic law," therefore it is often regarded as the codes established by jurists based on Islamic teachings. However, *shari'a* is the teaching that *Qur'an* and *Sunna* show, more properly, what concern with norms of people's life among them. As for the norms recommended by jurists based on Islamic teachings, we should call *fiqh* as this paper described in verse 1.

From these guidelines, it is clear that the committee has a strong sense of being responsible for contributing to spread and maintain Wahhabism in the country. However, in general, the occasions on which the committee draws people's attention, as we might have surmised from the nickname of "religious police," are the policing activities targeting Saudi citizens²⁴. Since this is an instance of organised violence, people's recognition of the committee is marked by both praise and censure. Although some people admit to the role of the committee in maintaining traditions in Saudi society to a degree, it is not always that the committee is given credit as the facilitator for the nation's founding ideology.

3. PVPV for Iran

(1) *Velāyat-e Faqīh* and Nation Building

Next, we consider how PVPV (Persian: *amr-e be-ma'rūf va nahy 'az monkar*) is positioned in Iran. As well known, present-day Iran was born through "the Islamic Revolution" in 1979. The revolution developed through demonstrations seeking reforms in the country, among them respect for Islamic values, against Moḥammad Reżā Pahlavī (1919-1980, r. 1941-1979), the last king of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), and his continuing Westernisation and modernisation of Iran. After the king fled the country, Rūḥ Allāh Mūsavī Khomeynī (1902-1989), an Islamic scholar in exile in Paris, returned to his homeland, and proceeded to act and establish a new government. At the core of the reforms he pushed, was his idea of *velāyat-e faqīh*, which he had been claiming during his exile.

Velāyat-e faqīh is a political concept that seeks the formation of a state under the governance of Islamic scholars (*faqīh*). In Twelver, the Shī'a sect dominant in Iran, it is permitted for Islamic scholars to use their expertise to look for solutions to problems concerning the code of life and to issue their own judgement based on Islam (*ijtihād*). This is because of the influence of the Usul school (*al-uṣūlīya*) since the 18th century, which led to Marja' (*marja-e taqlīd*), the institutionalisation of the authority of scholars, permitting religious authorities to decree Islamic norms. Based on this, Khomeynī claimed that religious authority and political authority should be rolled into one, in order to establish a righteous society.

The idea of *velāyat-e faqīh* is generally regarded as the ideological basis for the

²⁴ Le Renard's work shows PVPV's raids on women and their reactions toward it. Le Renard, 2015.

Iranian revolution, a form of theocracy, especially from the viewpoint of modern Western politics, since in contrast, it blends religion and politics. Therefore, what kind of role could PVPV have here? I would like to examine this through a book called *Resāle touzīh al-masā'el*.

(2) PVPV for Khomeynī

Resāle is a volume customarily written with the authority of Shi'a scholars, that expounds on a variety of issues, including everyday ones, through their own discretion based on Islam. In many cases, one chapter is given to discuss PVPV; Khomeynī also chooses PVPV in his *Resāle*. What is distinct in his explanation is that PVPV is positioned as a political issue concerning the defence of Islam, rather than as a norm for people's daily activity as below.

"If the deviation happens in Islam, such as vice by the tyrant government, [the practice of] PVPV is obligatory for especially Ulamas, those who should deny the evils and call the good²⁵."

"If the scholar's silence makes the tyrant government stronger, and leads to confirmation of the government's deeds, or to give the government more courage to do more evil deeds, calling good and denying evil is obligatory, even if it does not have any current effect²⁶."

As seen above, Khomeynī clearly refers to the symbolic vice such as evil deeds committed by "tyrant government." This is regarded as the definitive moment when PVPV becomes obligatory for Muslims.

The practice of PVPV towards the government is regarded as something that has nothing to do with people's daily activity. However, Khomeynī points out that people's behaviour can be the target of PVPV when they encourage the evils of the government as below.

"Muslims should not neglect the people who promote the purpose of the tyrant government and its satisfaction, sins and barbarousness, such as the merchant and

²⁵ Khomeynī, 2010/11 (1389), p. 446.

²⁶ Ibid.

traders [who commit a dishonest act]. Even if it [the practice of PVPV] does not have any effect, the people should keep away from them and not accompany or deal with them.²⁷”

Thus, PVPV for Khomeynī is not merely policing public morals for individuals, but focuses on resistance against collective vice toward the people. Therefore, it could be a theoretical development aimed at reaching the goal of Iranian revolution. Based on this viewpoint, PVPV in Iran could be a principle of thought and action for social justice based on Islam, that denies the corrupt power afflicting people. In fact, it is sometimes recognised that PVPV is the basic ideology that led to the revolution in 1979²⁸.

(3) Other Scholars' Explanations of PVPV

We can see similar explanations on PVPV through other Shi'a authorities in Iran. *Resāle* of Nāṣer Makārem Shīrāzī (1927-) and Ḥoseyn Nūrī Hamadānī (1925-), as below, claim that the government's anti-Islamic actions could be a motivation for PVPV.

“Whenever deviation happens in Islam, like the mischief done by impious governments in the name of Islam, PVPV is obligatory for everyone, especially Ulamas, to express right and deny the false²⁹.”

“PVPV has a special privilege among Islam's obligated acts and is an importance wisdom PVPV, obligation in Islam, similar to prayer, fasting and almsgiving, is religion's necessities, and whoever denies that it is obligation in spite of knowing its importance, is considered one of the infidels... Imām 'Alī said, “the most virtuous PVPV is that a brave faithful person stands against a tyrant power and fulfils this duty.³⁰”

The latter explanation by Hamadānī is significant that it claims PVPV as the resistance against the oppression. This is what Khomeynī emphasised in his claims on PVPV.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 449.

²⁸ Through the interview in August 2016 in Qom, with Dr. Bāqer Tālebī Dārabī, assistant professor of sociology of religion, and the chair of department of religious studies at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom, Iran.

²⁹ Shīrāzī, 1994/95 (1373), p. 439.

³⁰ Hamadānī, 2006/07 (1385), p. 435-437.

So, what is the explanation by Shi'a authority abroad? For example, 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Sīstānī (1930-), the most prominent figure among the Shi'a clerics in today's Iraq, refers to PVPV in his *Resāle*, quoting the practice in the ordinary relationship among people.

"The obligation of PVPV is more common among the family and relatives. If someone seems to miss his obligations such as prayer, fasting or *khums*³¹, and to do prohibited act such as smearing or inaccuracy, prevention of such irreverent actions and calling him to the good is obligation³²."

Other scholar, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍl Allāh (1935-2010) in Lebanon, explains in his *fatwā*, about the relationship between PVPV and society.

"When the good deeds are not practiced against the manifestation of evils by state, institution, group and organisation, and it [ill effect of the evils] reaches at the ordinary people... those who engage in the righteous guidance based on religion [should] make the effort as much as possible according to their position and abilities, in the field of preachment, guidance and enlightenment. And they should face the corrupt reality with wise, insight, speech and endurance. Then, they [should] work on turning their effort into a plan in the reality, with those who act together. Because such situation [the good deeds are not practiced against the evils by the power] is the time of grave danger which they [those who engage in the Islamic guidance] should use their force for the great mission³³."

From this explanation, similar to Khomeynī's, we can see the understanding that the people, especially Ulamas, should act and resist when evil is manifested by the power represented by the state. However, compared with Khomeynī's claims, who was strongly aware of the Pahlavi dynasty as the particular enemy, the claims of Faḍl Allāh seem to be a general principle, based on the ambiguity of what the evil is.

Regarding the different degrees of interest seen between Khomeynī and other Shi'a clerics abroad, it is worth considering that the political situation surrounding them

³¹ *Khums*, littelary "one-fifth" in Arabic, is an obligation to pay one-fifth of the spoils of war to the Caliph or Sultan.

³² Sīstānī, 2017/18 (1394), p. 343.

³³ Faḍl Allāh, 2011, p. 605.

are different, although al-Sīstānī and Faḍl Allāh are both affiliated to Twelver just like Khomeynī. Given the situation that the reconciliation between Sunni and Shī'a for Iraq, and co-existence among Maronite, Sunni, and Shī'a for Lebanon are required for the political solution in these two countries, to claim the defeat of the regime itself might be beyond the role of the religious authority in each country.

4. Conclusion

As reviewed above, in Saudi Arabia and Iran, PVPV could be said to be a kind of driving force for the purpose of forming a new society based on each ideological background, Wahhabism and *velāyat-e faqīh*. However, for Saudi Arabia, it is not that PVPV itself gave significance to the existence of the country. What gave it was the ambition to conquer the Arabian Peninsula based on the religio-political pact in which the identity of interest between the house of Su'ūd and the house of Shaykh was seen. On the other hand, for Iran, PVPV sustained the legitimacy of the revolution, therefore it could be said to be a factor of establishment of the republic. From this point of view, the character of PVPV as a founding ideology is stronger in the case of Iran than Saudi Arabia.

However, as described for al-Sīstānī and Faḍl Allāh, PVPV as an Islamic teaching does not always have the aspect of a founding ideology, depending on the situation of each country and the political position of the ideologues. Since this paper does not explore the core of PVPV as a teaching and thought, it could be a step to consider forming a comparative view between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which gain attention only through their dogmatic difference and geopolitical conflict.

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